

## **Proposition 2: Good for chickens, bad for chicken farmers**

*In the current economy, it's better to let the market sort out the cage-free issue instead of forcing ranchers to make expensive changes to their practices.*

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SACRAMENTO — The odd duck on the Nov. 4 California ballot is the measure calling for chicken rights.

The right for egg-laying hens "to lie down, stand up, fully extend their limbs and turn around freely" in their little cages, to quote from Proposition 2.

The initiative, sponsored by the Humane Society of the United States, also applies to pregnant pigs and caged calves being raised for veal. But the largest pork producer in California already has said it will stop using small crates. And there are few veal operations in the state.

So Proposition 2 really is about California's 19 million egg-laying hens. Calves and pigs were added, I suspect, because strategists concluded that voters relate more to mammals than to squawking birds.

This is not your ordinary election issue. It's on the ballot with such normal proposition topics as abortion, drugs, legislative redistricting and same-sex marriage.

But it's a heated campaign -- proponents accusing the egg farmers of inhumanely caging hens, the farmers denying it and warning the measure would force them out of business. It's a big bucks contest, with both sides pouring in millions.

Polls have shown Proposition 2 winning handily. But I'm guessing most voters haven't really focused in, that they've had a lot more on their minds lately than the treatment of chickens. I've been torn myself. I like chickens and respect them. But they're tough to warm up to. Growing up on a small orange ranch in Ojai, I did my share of shoveling chicken manure, collecting eggs, and serving up corn mash and table scraps. Many a Sunday, my brother and I would be sent to the chicken pen to select and prepare the dinner entree for our mother to fry.

We'd wield the hatchet and not give it a second thought. These aren't cuddly critters. Mean is their routine. Chickens, after all, invented the pecking order, the original organization chart. And they'll peck persistently on a weak colleague.

Ours were "free range" chickens, to use today's highfalutin terminology. We'd let them roam the orchard during the day, pecking for seeds and insects. At evening, our border collie-Australian shepherd would herd the birds back into their pen and they'd strut into the sheltered roosting area for the night.

It was a good life for the chickens -- an Old McDonald's Farm existence that has little relationship to today's factory egg farms.

Today, commercial egg-layers are crammed four, six, eight to a cage, depending on the size, each bird with less space than an 8-1/2-by-11-inch piece of paper. No perching. No dust bathing. That's the bad.

The good, farmers counter, is that California cages are relatively sanitary because the manure falls onto conveyor belts. The eggs are carried away by other conveyor belts. And the building is climate-controlled to the chickens' liking.

A small percentage of the hens are confined cage-free in barns. But production costs are higher and the eggs are at least twice as expensive for consumers, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Also, some uncouth hens lay their eggs on the floor in manure. The aim of Proposition 2 is to corral all egg-laying hens into barns that, although crowded, leave enough room to turn "in a complete circle without any impediment." That means not having to touch another bird.

"All animals deserve humane treatment, including animals raised for food," says Wayne Pacelle, president and chief executive officer of the Humane Society of the United States. "We're not asking for the moon and the stars. We're simply asking that animals be allowed to turn around and engage in basic behavior."

What's wrong with that, I asked the opposition camp. One answer was that the premise is false.

"They can stand up, lay down, turn around, flap their wings, groom, interact with their neighbors in their small social groups," says Nancy Reimers, a poultry veterinarian in egg country near Modesto. But she concedes: "They can't all do it at once."

If hens are too stressed out because they're cramped, she continues, they won't lay eggs; yet these birds are very prolific egg-layers.

Another vet who supports the ballot measure disagrees. "Many animals, including humans, continue to go through the ovulation cycle while under stress," says Kate Hurley, a UC Davis veterinarian who is featured in a Proposition 2 TV ad.

With all of today's problems in California -- slumping economy, unemployment, state budget deficit, 800,000 children without health insurance -- why should we worry about whether chickens are comfortable, I asked.

"We can address the other problems our society faces but also be decent to animals," Pacelle replies. "I don't think we suspend our humanity or decency just because we have an economic downturn."

But Ryan Armstrong, a third-generation egg farmer in San Diego County, says he'd be forced out of business if Proposition 2 passes. He currently has 650,000 birds -- 50,000 cage-free and 600,000 in cages. "I don't have all my eggs in one basket."

He estimates that going completely cage-free would cost \$20 million for additional land and barns. "My banker would laugh at me," he says. "They're not loaning money to each other, let alone a chicken farmer. I've already called the BOA and they're not interested."

The more roomy hen quarters would not be required until 2015. But farmers would have to start investing in new facilities long before that.

I'm for chicken compassion. But I feel more compassionate about the chicken farmer in this bankrupting economy.

The issue of hen confinement should be worked out between farmers, animal rights activists and consumers through the marketplace.

I'm going to ask my wife to buy only eggs from cage-free chickens. Then I'll probably vote against Proposition 2.

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